

The elegant home John Sugden designed for his mother, Roberta Sugden, reveals his fascination with planes, surfaces, and a building's site.

Courtesy of Jutta Sugden



## John Sugden: Modern Architecture Utah-Style

by Anne G. Mooney



Courtesy of Jutta Sugden

### Architect John W. Sugden (1922-2003)

endowed Utah with an unprecedented legacy of outstanding modernist buildings. His sleek technological forms and impeccably-executed details inspired architects and sophisticated clients alike.

Sugden's designs reflect a profound appreciation for nature fostered under the tutelage of his father and a rigorous formal clarity developed under the influence of his mentor, the master architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969). His blend of Miesian-inspired modernism coupled with his Utah-inspired naturalism led to a unique application of modernist ideals within the western landscape.

### Utah Roots, Chicago Training

Sugden was born in Chicago in 1922 where his father was attending medical school. When he was a young boy, the family returned to its native Utah. Sugden traveled extensively with his father through Utah's scenic landscape and learned to ski, rock climb, and love the mountainous terrain. Throughout his life Sugden remained profoundly influenced by his father.

Shortly after he graduated from East High School in Salt Lake City, Sugden enlisted in the U. S. Army 10th Mountain Division and saw active duty on the front lines in Italy during World War II. There he earned a number of citations including the Silver Star.





Sugden served as an assistant to Mies van der Rohe on the design of the Farnsworth House, an icon of modern architecture. Mies's influence is evident in much of Sugden's work.

Photo by Carol Highsmith, courtesy of the National Trust for Historic Preservation

As he was being decommissioned from the Army, Sugden was stationed briefly in Chicago. There he first encountered the influential European architects Mies van der Rohe and Ludwig Hilberseimer while studying at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). As Sugden's son Evan A. Sugden recalls, "His professional training took off almost instantly, propelled by a strong attraction to their stunning works and compelling modernist ideals."

Sugden worked as a student and draftsman in the offices of Mies from 1945 until 1952. Sugden was also a student, and the only associate, of Ludwig Hilberseimer. With Mies, Sugden served as project architect on the 860 Lake Shore Drive apartment building in

Chicago and oversaw a number of buildings on the IIT campus. He consulted on the reconstruction of the German Pavilion, originally designed by Mies in 1929 for the Barcelona International Exhibition and widely considered to be one of the seminal works of modern architecture. In 1952, Sugden brought this privileged experience and knowledge to Utah to set up his own practice.

### Architectural Practice

Sugden garnered a number of commissions from private clients that allowed him to work steadily in the early decades of his practice. This body of work constitutes his greatest contribution and consists of a series of important buildings of timeless and classic modern architecture.

The Makoff family of Salt Lake City proved an excellent client for Sugden. It provided him with public and private commissions, including the Makoff apparel stores on South Temple Street and in the Cottonwood Mall, a series of private residences, and the Makoff family mausoleum. Sugden's public commissions still intact include the University of Utah Merrill Engineering Building (designed in collaboration with Dean L. Gustavson's office) and the additions to the Alta Lodge.

Sugden's non-traditional work, however, was not widely sought after in Utah. It has



not been well-preserved and, in some cases, has been completely destroyed. A medical office building Sugden designed in Holladay, used as a textbook case study for multi-story steel buildings, was obliterated in an expansion. The Green River High School in Emery County, with its clear floating gym ceiling and exterior trusses, was demolished. A number of Sugden's residential projects have also been destroyed or remodeled beyond recognition.

From 1966 to 1993 Sugden supported himself and his family, in part, with a professorship at the University of Utah Graduate School of Architecture. During this time he developed related talents in writing and painting in oil and acrylics. As a professor he was known as a gifted teacher. A student of Sugden's, Salt Lake City-based architect Ken Pollard, recalls "What John taught was about building structure and space, knowing the material and taking it beyond building to poetry. Abstraction was key to his beliefs. It can be seen in his paintings and when you walk into his projects. He believed moving something just a couple of inches meant so much in activation of the space."

### Modernism Meets Nature

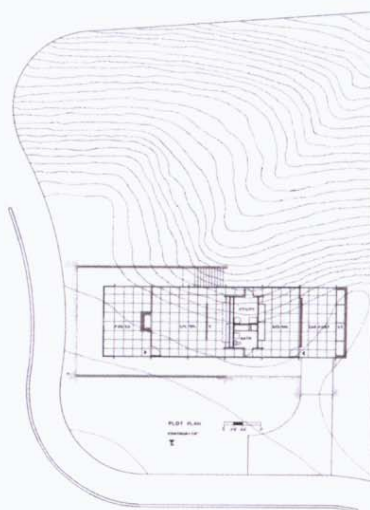
Sugden designed Miesian-inspired precision of structure and detailing into his elegant residential projects. He also shared architect Frank Lloyd Wright's dedication to seeing that homes "sit well within their sites." Modernist architects have tended to believe it is more important for their work be in keeping with the age than in harmony with the surroundings. Sugden seemed to disagree. His residential jewels in Salt Lake and Summit Counties are tucked neatly within their sites and, in fact, almost camouflaged completely during full-foliage months.

The first residence Sugden built was a home designed for his mother, Roberta Sugden, in 1955 on a wooded site in Millcreek. He had recently returned to Salt Lake City after completing his apprenticeship and was eager to apply his training within this new environment. The house is clearly inspired by

Mies' influential Farnsworth House near Plano, Illinois. Sugden served as an assistant on the Farnsworth project in 1951. Like the Farnsworth House, the Millcreek dwelling features expanses of floor to ceiling glass supported by a steel framework.

Although completely open, the interior of Roberta's house feels private and intimate. This is partially due to its human scale and the humanizing relationship of the building to its natural surroundings. The neutral background of Sugden's architecture allows the homeowner to color the space. As the present owner, Mollie Kimball, exclaims, "The walls are green" from the unobstructed views of the surrounding gardens. Snowy white walls envelop the space in winter.

The carefully sited design achieves a rare feeling of connectedness to the landscape within its suburban setting. The house, nestled into the trees to the north, overlooks a steep ravine to the south. The low winter sunlight extends straight through the house, warming the interior surfaces. In the summer, the roof canopy shades the interior from



Courtesy of Jutta Sugden

Achieving harmony between a building and its site was a priority in Sugden's work. As this original site plan shows, the Roberta Sugden House is balanced gently on the edge of a ravine in Salt Lake City's Millcreek neighborhood.



Courtesy of Jutta Sugden

The Roberta Sugden House's original kitchen, shown here, featured steel cabinets and counter tops. The current owner has carefully restored them.



Photo by Peter Goss

The innovative Green River High School in Emery County is one of several Sugden buildings that have been demolished.





Photo by Brian Griffin

Open space flows around the central kitchen and hearth in this Sugden home in Emigration Canyon. The current owner added a graceful, circular staircase to unite the separate first-floor studio and second-floor living spaces.

the harsh sun directly overhead. Sugden built a small working studio below Roberta's house where he spent much time. In the summer months he slept on a cot in the open-air porch, now an enclosed dining room.

When the property was later put up for sale, an appraiser struggled to affix a price to the unusual house. "I've never seen anything like it," he explained, unaware of its classic and famous origins. Appreciative of its history and significance, Kimball purchased the home from one of several owners following Roberta and carefully undertook a restoration of the deteriorating structure.

Especially challenging was the reversal of the several additions and "improvements" that had tampered with the integrity of Sugden's original design. Among the com-

ponents Kimball preserved is Sugden's original kitchen design featuring Republic Steel painted metal cabinets and a continuous stainless steel countertop with integral stove burners. Her efforts earned her a 2005 Utah Heritage Foundation Heritage Award recognizing her thoughtful and well-researched renovation project.

### Living in a Tree House

Another Sugden-designed residence stands at the mouth of Emigration Canyon. Architect Kathryn Anderson, a

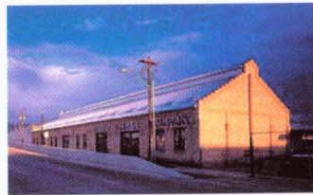


Photo by Brian Griffin

The combination of Emigration Canyon's dense foliage and Sugden's glass walls creates the sense of "living in a tree house."



Salt Lake Tabernacle, in progress



Bogue Supply Building, 2002



Cowles Building, 2001



Gardner Hall, 1999



Ford Motor Company, 1999



Noyes Building, 1998



Vernal LDS Temple, 1997



Salt Lake Hardware, 1996



Joseph Smith Memorial, 1992



Squatter's Pub Interior, 1989



Pierpont Development, 1986

FFKR  
Architects



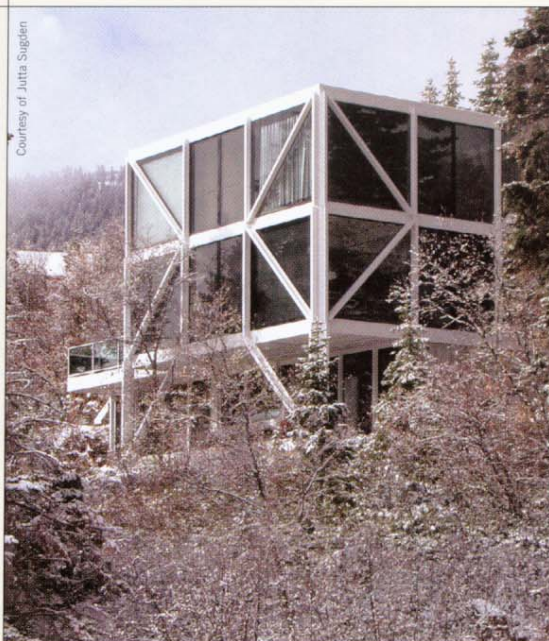
former student of Sugden, found the petite mountain dwelling in 1998. She had jokingly mentioned she was looking for a “glass house” and, shortly thereafter, a Realtor drove up the canyon and led her up a steep approach until the home came into view. Anderson immediately recognized it as a Sugden design and purchased it two days later.

Sugden built the structure in 1965 for his colleague and draftsman, Charlie Griffin. The design was conceived of as a live-work space with living space above for Griffin and his wife and separate workspace for the Sugden architectural studio below. Outside sits the original Sugden-designed doghouse, a miniature matching the mid-century modern architecture of the main house.

By punching a hole through the floor, Anderson connected the upper and lower volumes with a circular staircase. The precisely-scaled, perfectly-square volume is uninterrupted by the walls and doors of a conventional house. Rather, a central service core with a kitchen, bath, and fireplace hearth define space, while living, sleeping and dining programs float around it. “After living here I wouldn’t know what to do with a door or a wall,” Anderson muses of her unobstructed floor plan. The overall feeling of inhabiting the space, according to Anderson, is “like living in a tree house” with an indescribably intimate connection to nature.

Admittedly the worst of this house, as with other Sugden homes, is the winter heating bill. Just as Frank Lloyd Wright’s residential work is notorious for leaking roofs, the

Courtesy of Jutta Sugden



The home Sugden designed for himself and his wife, Jutta Alwang Sugden, hovers amidst the trees on Parley’s Summit.

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use of glass and steel as primary building materials renders Sugden’s houses notoriously cold in winter. His structures would benefit from new glazing technologies, solar heating, heavy insulation, and energy-efficient HVAC systems.

The structures also present an entirely different set of maintenance problems from the deterioration of the gasket membranes, to the rusting of the exposed steel deck ceilings, to the replacement of the expansive sheets of glazing. Preservationists are now developing the techniques to preserve and restore these modern materials.

### Cube Sweet Cube

Thirty years after returning to Utah, Sugden designed his own home on a hillside at the summit of Parley’s Canyon. Sugden’s wife, artist and graphic designer Jutta Alwang Sugden, continues to live in the home. The ground floor of the three-story live-work studio incorporates a covered carport, entrance, and a library and archive of creative work. A 45-degree open-deck steel stair tower leads up to the living-dining room and kitchen. The sleek black-and-white space has a theatrical quality and sets a dramatic tone lightened by the large-scale, colorful Sugden painting that forms one wall. Here the visible structure and cross-bracing details can be appreciated up close.

The upper floor houses the live-work space, with sleeping and bathing quarters and a working design studio. The black concrete floors are softened with a grid of white sport court floor tiles, an innovative application of a material typically used as an underlayment. Floating walls and a digitally-designed panel created by Jutta free the ceiling from obstruction, allowing light to spill over walls and establish zones for working and living. The space is flooded with natural light from expansive glazing and a central overhead skylight and has an entirely different feeling from that of the proportionally equal floor below.

Sugden enjoyed visiting the site when his house was under construction, watching the structure go up. Just after the steel was erected and before the windows went in, Jutta photographed him sitting in a director’s chair on the just-poured concrete floor



One of Sugden’s paintings adds a splash of color and creates a free-floating wall on the dramatic black-and-white main floor of Sugden’s home.



within the structure he so carefully brought into being. Sugden's plans for a home on an adjacent lot sit awaiting an appreciative buyer to realize the project.

### Sugden's Legacy

All of Sugden's structures exhibit a direct connection between the conception and the execution of design. Detailing, material, and tectonics ARE the buildings' concepts. This integrated attitude toward technology sets Sugden's work apart from that of his contemporaries. An active participant on-site during the construction phase, he ensured that his techniques (along with his structures) were exposed and executed with a great concern for detail. His is an architecture of planes, where every surface is considered, its connections at the top and base fully resolved and expressed. It is also an architecture without nails and without applied, superficial ornament.

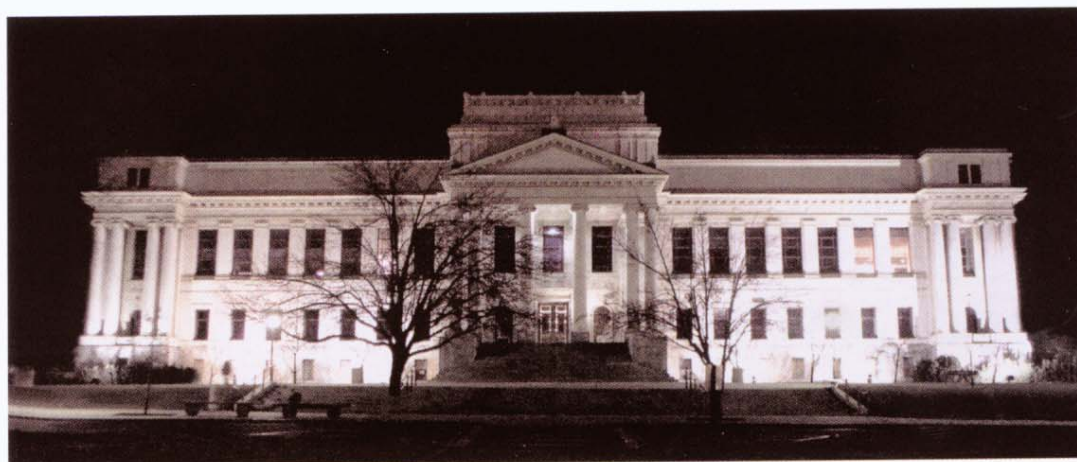
Though Sugden's architecture was associated with the International Style movement at the time of his education, his career emerged as uniquely western in its inextricable tie to the Utah environment. To him, the simplicity and formal restraint of modernism was not only a reaction to the misdirection of other stylistic movements in architecture, but also an illumination of nature, context, and the essence of human habitation.

Sugden's work prefigures current trends in an emerging international neo-modernist design movement. No longer a cold and site-less solution, today's new take on modernism offers a framework for building that easily transforms itself. It responds

to a multitude of climatic and cultural contexts, utilizing state-of-the-art technologies and building systems and incorporating sustainable design principles. Because the spirit of Sugden's work reflects these current trends, his designs merit study, recognition, and preservation.

John Sugden produced a body of architecture that is simultaneously modest and understated, yet surprisingly radical and rich. We are gifted to have this body of work in Utah. It is now our responsibility to preserve Sugden's legacy of modernist expression for future generations. \*

Anne G. Mooney is an assistant professor at the University of Utah, College of Architecture + Planning and a principal of the design firm Sparano + Mooney Architecture.



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357 west pierpont avenue  
salt lake city, utah 84101  
801.364.5161 TEL  
801.364.5167 FAX  
[www.mjsaa.com](http://www.mjsaa.com)